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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000511

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SUBJECT: INTERNAL SP RUMBLINGS ON EVE OF GATHERING

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN L. WITHERS II FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On July 28, in anticipation of the Central Election Commission (CEC) announcing the results of the last three regions, Tirana, Fier, and Shokdra on July 27, the SP will convene to determine its next steps. Mayor of Tirana and SP Party Chairman Edi Rama told Ambassador that the SP will enter Parliament, but will continue to voice its deep concerns about the election process. Other sources have said that in tomorrow's assembly, Rama will state that the elections were irregular, manipulated, and the SP does not recognize their results. Regardless, the SP will enter Parliament (i.e. no boycott) but will press for early elections, according to Rama. One SP strategist said Rama made all the wrong moves in the elections, but agreed that his grip on the party remains strong, despite the public grumbling from some members. According to another, the two major reasons for the SP loss were the failure of the SP and LSI to enter a coalition together and weak candidates, many of whom appeared to have only one qualification for office: loyalty to Rama. End summary.

¶2. (C) On July 28, the SP will convene in anticipation of the the Central Election Commission's (CEC) certifying of the three final districts, Tirana, Fier, and Shkoder on July 27. The other nine regions have had their results certified previously. This assembly, according to SP MP and strategist Ben Blushi, will help determine the SP's next steps in the electoral process. Blushi and most other observers Post has spoken with, including Electoral College judges, agree that the elections will be over on by August 1 in accordance with the Electoral Code statute that gives parties five days after all the districts are certified to appeal the distribution of the mandates by the CEC. (Note: Albania has a regional proportional system so votes are allocated accordingly. End note.) The assembly will open with a speech by Rama in which he will outline his plans and then a discussion will ensue and finally the SP will vote on how to move forward. Usually in these sessions, according to Blushi, the media is present for the opening speeches and then asked to leave once they are completed, however Blushi said he will urge for full media coverage throughout the meeting. (Note: The assembly is composed of the SP MPs and representatives from the regions. End note.)

¶3. (C) Blushi told Poloff on July 25 that the main item of discussion for the SP assembly is whether or not to not recognize the election results and/or boycott the new parliament. In a meeting with Ambassador on July 27, Rama said that the SP will enter Parliament, but will continue to make its complaints about the process known. Post has also learned that the main points of Rama's speech will be that: the elections were irregular and manipulated, the SP does not recognize their results but the SP will be present in Parliament (i.e. no boycott) in order to investigate the "crimes" of June 28, and finally the SP will demand early

elections in order to restore "legitimacy" to the Parliament.

The Assembly will probably vote for whatever outcome Rama desires since, according to Blushi and others, Rama has installed a large majority of loyalists in the SP.

WE LOST THE ELECTION

14. (C) Speaking more generally, Blushi said that the elections are over and the SP should accept its loss and move on. He did not think that the appeals for Fier, Berat, and other regions would have had much of an impact; the SP simply lost the election. He cited two major reasons for the SP failure: candidates and coalitions. Many of the candidates, the vast majority of whom were selected personally by Rama with little or no consultation, were not suitable for office and their only qualification was a loyalty to Rama, according to Blushi. He lamented several of the so-called "thug" or "bodyguard" candidates such as Tom Doshi from Shkoder and other questionable candidates in Lezhe and other areas. He said that the SP cannot tolerate such individuals in its party and by doing so it has taken the party back twenty years. He said Doshi told Rama that Rama cannot resign as Chairman since Doshi had invested EUR 500,000 on the election in Shkoder and he wants this money back. Blushi said the money spent was to no avail.

15. (C) While the candidates are important, the main failure was in the SP's coalition, according to Blushi. He said Rama's unwillingness to negotiate with LSI's Ilir Meta virtually assured a defeat for the SP and the left. (Comment: Meta also did not indicate that he was willing to negotiate

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with the SP. End comment.) As many observers have noted, a combined SP-LSI coalition would have won handily. Blushi added that the lack of a coherent platform did not help matters either; senior SP strategist Kastriot Islami agreed with this in a separate meeting and added that Rama made all the wrong moves in this election.

WHO WILL BE THE NEXT CHAIRMAN OF THE SP?

16. (C) Finally, Blushi said that the SP will likely convene again in August or September in order to resolve the Chairmanship issue. According to SP rules, if the Chairman loses an election, he must resign. However, Blushi and others suspect that Rama may be planning to declare the elections stolen so that he will not be forced to resign his seat as Chairman, since he did not lose, but rather was "robbed." Adding some credence to this scenario is the fact that most of the assembly members were largely handpicked by him and will support whatever Rama decides. Blushi demurred when asked about potential challengers to Rama, however media have reported that Blushi himself, former Finance Minister Arben Malaj and others may challenge Rama. Blushi, Malaj and others have made very public statements against Rama and the SP electoral strategy. Despite these names, Islami said there are no real viable candidates right now in the SP to challenge Rama and offered that former PM Fatos Nano, who is vacationing in Greece, is waiting for the party to self-destruct. For his part, Rama told Ambassador that he is in no danger of being unseated as SP chairman.

17. (C) Comment: We are relieved that the option of a Parliamentary boycott appears to be off the table. Such a move would have likely had very negative ramifications for the SP and Albania. As the rumblings within the SP grow increasingly louder, it will be interesting to see how the SP Chairmanship issue is resolved. Rama seems confident about retaining this role and no serious challengers seem to have come forward to campaign against him, despite the fact that more than a few SP members are pointing the finger at Rama for the SP loss. His tight grip on the party may allow him to hang onto power. August will continue to heat up as the SP moves forward.

